

# First breeding record of Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla* for Mauritania, in Diawling National Park

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**Première preuve de nidification de la Marouette de Baillon *Porzana pusilla* en Mauritanie, dans le Parc National du Diawling.** Un poussin de la Marouette de Baillon *Porzana pusilla* a été capturé dans un marais peu profond de *Sporobolus / Scirpus* du Parc National du Diawling, au sud-ouest de la Mauritanie, le 24 janvier 2010. Comme l'oiseau était âgé d'environ 20–25 jours, l'éclosion a dû se produire début janvier 2010. Ceci est la première preuve de nidification de l'espèce pour le pays. La nidification de cette marouette en Afrique de l'Ouest n'a été prouvée qu'en 2009, au nord-ouest du Sénégal et en Gambie.

Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla* is a widespread species with breeding populations in the Palearctic, eastern and southern Africa, and the Oriental and Australasian regions (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Taylor 1996). Little is known about its status and ecology owing to the bird's secretive behaviour. Estimates of European populations are therefore highly tentative (Koshelev 2004) and abundance data are hardly available for Africa (Taylor & van Perlo 1998). European Baillon's Crakes are considered migratory. Winter quarters are assumed to be situated along the

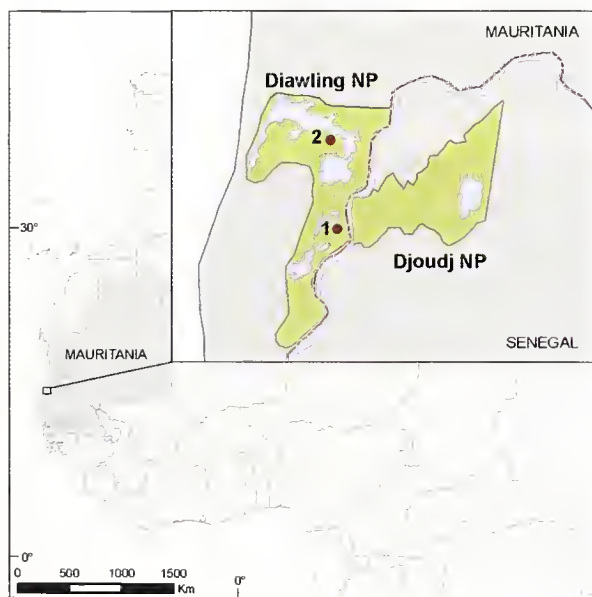
Mediterranean, but several records of presumed Palearctic migrants during spring and autumn in desert oases indicate trans-Saharan movements (e.g. Algeria: Isenmann *et al.* 2000; Libya: Moltoni 1928; North Sudan: Nikolaus 1981). Furthermore, sporadic observations in Senegal and Somalia during autumn and winter support the hypothesis of wintering sites south of the Sahara, as have been reported for two other Palearctic crake species, Spotted *P. porzana* and Little Crakes *P. parva* (Archer & Godman 1937, Roux & Morel 1964, Cramp & Simmons 1980). For Mauritania, the species was assumed to occur based on records on the Senegalese side of the Senegal Delta (Lamarche 1988).

An expedition by the BirdLife International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team (AWCT) found a considerable number of Baillon's Crakes within Djoudj National Park and its vicinity, north-west Senegal, in the winter of 2007 (Salewski *et al.* 2009). Following this discovery, the status and size of this newly discovered population is being investigated, as part of a Ph.D. project under the auspices of the Ornithological Station 'Hiddensee', Germany.

In spring 2009, breeding of Baillon's Crake in Senegal (in Djoudj National Park) and the Gambia (in a wetland near Pakali Ba) was established for the first time (Seifert *et al.* 2012). Given the proximity of similar habitats in Diawling National Park, on the east side of the Senegal River in southern Mauritania, it was suspected that the species might breed there too.

## Material and Methods

During an AWCT expedition on 23–27 January 2010, birds were trapped at two sites within Diawling National Park (Fig. 1): the Bassin du



**Figure 1.** Location of Diawling National Park in the Senegal Delta, south-west Mauritania. Numbers indicate the catching sites: 1) Bassin du Bell and 2) Bassin du Tianbrank.

Carte de la région indiquant le Parc National du Diawling, delta du Senegal, sud-ouest de la Mauritanie. Les numéros indiquent les sites de capture : 1) Bassin du Bell et 2) Bassin du Tianbrank.

Bell (16°22'48.2"N 16°20'30.4"W) and the Bassin du Tianbrank (16°28'12.5"N 16° 21'18.1"W). Ten fall traps (Bub 1995) were installed along a transect line and the shoreline of small ponds interspersed within the *Scirpus maritimus* / *S. littoralis* marshes. Trapping was undertaken from sunrise to midday (07.00–14.00 hrs).

## Results and Discussion

We caught one Baillon's Crake chick in the Bassin du Bell on 24 January. Another bird of unknown age was flushed close to Mirador Tichilitt, on the shoreline of the Bassin du Tianbrank, on 27 January. The chick was estimated to be 20–25 days old (e.g. remains of black downy feathers still visible, bill pale yellow with blackish base, and initiating primary growth; Cramp & Simmons 1980, Taylor & van Perlo 1998, Seifert *et al.* 2012) and thus probably hatched in early January (Figs. 2–3).

This is the first proven breeding record of Baillon's Crake for Mauritania (Isenmann *et al.* 2010). (Although Isenmann *et al.* (2010) mention, in French, that 'poussins' (plural) were found in January 2010, there was only a single chick.)

Baillon's Crakes are confined to wetland habitats with dense vegetation and rather shallow water levels (Szabó 1975, Taylor & van Perlo 1998). The vast *Scirpus maritimus* / *Sporobolus* areas in the Basin du Bell and extensive *S. maritimus* stands on the southern shore of the Diawling constitute optimal habitats for the species. At the time of the AWCT expedition, most of the water within the park had evaporated, substantially diminishing the extent of suitable habitat. We therefore expect that Baillon's Crake occurs at a higher density earlier in the season when water levels are higher and the marshes inundated. The Baillon's Crake chick caught in the Bassin du Bell was unable to fly and thus leave the area, as the adults probably did when the site became dry some weeks previously. Water levels in the park usually peak around 15 October when the sluices are closed, after being open from the onset of the wet season in July. Vegetation reaches its maximum extent in late September / October (I. Ndaye pers. comm.). The breeding period of Baillon's Crake may therefore commence in early autumn. A Baillon's Crake caught on 24 December 2009 near the 'Ouvrage du Bell' (J.

Foucher pers. comm.) and identified as a subadult was probably from a first brood. However, it cannot be excluded that this bird might have come from a late brood in, e.g. Spain, and was overwintering in Mauritania, as nothing is known concerning the timing of moult in juvenile Baillon's Crakes. Otherwise, the chick caught during our expedition must have originated from a later brood, begun in late November / early December within the national park.



**Figure 2.** Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla* chick, Bassin du Bell, Diawling National Park, Mauritania, 24 January 2010 (V. Salewski)

Poussin de la Marouette de Baillon *Porzana pusilla*, Bassin du Bell, Parc National du Diawling, Mauritanie, 24 janvier 2010 (V. Salewski)



**Figure 3.** Wing of Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla* chick showing visible primary growth, Bassin du Bell, Diawling National Park, Mauritania, 24 January 2010 (V. Salewski)

L'aile du poussin de la Marouette de Baillon *Porzana pusilla* montrant les rémiges primaires encore en mue, Bassin du Bell, Parc National du Diawling, Mauritanie, 24 janvier 2010 (V. Salewski)



The results of trapping in Djoudj National Park, Senegal, in spring 2009 and 2010 suggest a similarly timed breeding period (Seifert *et al.* 2012). As the vast *Scirpus* / *Sporobolus* marshes on the western and eastern sides of the Senegal River belong to the same system, Baillon's Crakes recorded on the Mauritanian and Senegalese sides can be considered a single population. Hence, conservation activities such as water management in both national parks, Diawling and Djoudj, should be coordinated.

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